50: Pulu I-5 (no date) 1973 OU9 Tonga OU9

ALTERNATIVE MEANINGS FOR TONGAN PLACE NAMES

There is little doubt that Mr Gifford's Tongan "scholars" did their best, but the two Tongan men he relied on were chiefs, and chiefs were seldom trusted with chronicles which were often associated with place names. This knowledge was trusted to spokesmen, and theirs was the task of knowing place names which perserved for posterity the unwritten historical events that had transpired at those places. The European Tongan scholars, too, could not have been sufficiently versed in Tongan oral traditions and histories to be able to go beyond a mere literal translation of the meanings of many place names.

The stories given later on in this paper will help to illustrate how important it is to know oral traditions if one is to give correct meanings to place names. These stories were well known to the old people of Ha'apai islands but now are known to only a few. I learned of these stories at the many informal gatherings at my father's house where I was frequently called to serve kava. I treasured this delightful task as I could sit inconspicuously behind the kava mixer and listen to the older people tell tales of former days. And so later, when I saw Gifford's book and the erroneous meanings he had given to these places, I was shocked and grieved, for the present trend in Tonga is to accept anything in black and white as the absolute truth. Gifford's written words will be the accepted authority in the meanings of Tongan place names, and the true non-recorded meanings of some of these place names will pass on to forgotten history with the death of their tellers.

Going hand in hand with Gifford's lack of knowledge of historical events and the deficiencies of the orthography[2] that he used, are the complicating factors of the dynamics of language change at work. This gives some names a different pronunciation from the original, and thus makes a difference in their meaning unless one knows what they originally referred to.

Let us look at how this factor of language change has modified the following two words: /'auhangamea/ and /te'ekiu/ which Gifford listed as:

1. "Auhangamea. Panting to destroy things (auha, destroyed; nga, to pant; mea, things; perhaps referring to the heaving of the billows from the open ocean.) Strait between Tatafu and Uoleva island (H)."[3]
2. "Teekiu. Plover excrement (tee, excrement; kiu, plover Haradrius fulvus). Village on Tongatapu island (T). Also a track on Nomuka island (H). Also a tract near Hihifo, village on Foa island (H)."[4]

A correction to Gifford's spelling of Auhangamea to get its present pronunciation must be made with the addition of the glottal stop before the initial vowel. Gifford listed this word as having three morphemes: (auha + nga + mea) with their respective meanings as listed above. The original pronunciation of this word was /'auha + 'anga + me'a/ containing the morphemes /'auha/ "to suffer destruction" /'anga/ nominalising suffix, and /me'a/ "thing;" this was reduced to /'auhangamea/ by deletion of /'a/ from /'anga/ to form /nga/, and the elimination of /'/ from /me'a/ to form /mea/. The meaning thus formed from this compound word is "the place where things are destroyed, or lost."

This name was not given to the strait because of "the heaving of the billows" as suggested by Gifford, nor was it given to commemorate a "trivial event," but to record orally an important event long forgotten by most except the few story tellers who still remember the legend of Sisimata'ila'aa whose carelessness caused the bag of curses to be opened while the boat of the Tu'i Tonga was crossing it.

2. In the orthography used by Gifford, there is representation of neither the glottal stop nor the vowel length, both of which are phonemes of high frequency.
3. Gifford 1923:42.
4. Ibid.:218.